

Case Study 2001

“Hey Miss, who are you?”

For my practicum I was teaching Year 5/6 in an inner city Sydney primary school. My co-operating teacher and my university supervisor have repeatedly assured me that this was a particularly difficult class but as I have nothing to compare it with I cannot comment on this. The staff had regarded this class as particularly challenging since kindergarten. This year the Assistant Principal took the class on special request from the Principal because of the special needs of the class in relation to discipline. The co-operating teacher has lectured on classroom management and is regarded highly by the staff for having been very successful in assisting difficult students to reform their behaviour.

On my first observation lesson I was shocked when I entered the classroom to find the students, desks placed in four rows of two. When the students were seated I saw that many students actually sat alone. The classroom was almost bare with some text type work on one of the pin boards only. This was nothing like the classrooms that I have seen before which have students, work covering the walls and desks set up in groups. This classroom was cold, stark and restrained.

The first twenty minutes of my observation were spent at the back of the room while the teacher hauled the kids over the coals for their apparently appalling behaviour the previous day when they had been with a casual teacher. They all looked suitably repentant but the drilling was pretty ferocious. Once the lesson started I was amazed at how tough the teacher was with the students. Every time someone whispered to a neighbour or played with a pencil case it was a major incident. Every tiny misdemeanour was pounced on immediately by the teacher. I would not say that the children were scared of him but it was clear that they knew he meant business. He would be really angry about a small amount of chatter one-minute and telling them a funny story the next. I was confused, was he angry with them or not? Did the kids know what was going on?

On my third observation a number of teachers were ill and replacements had not been found. In the afternoon the students went to Public Schools Sports Association (PSSA) for competition with other schools. The girls, soccer team was mostly from my class and I was asked to help out on the grounds that the other teachers would be on hand if I needed assistance. I was keen to be involved and gladly accepted without consideration. When we got to the ground all of the other teachers promptly disappeared to opposite ends of an enormous sports field so that I could not even see where they were let alone call out to them. Things started out OK but as the afternoon wore on the behaviour deteriorated from lighting BBQs to one girl being sent from the soccer field for back-chatting the referee. By the time we boarded the return bus I was completely miserable. For the first time I experienced the sought of behaviour the students were capable of and I realised I had no idea of how to deal with it.

I felt that it was important that the students understood that the rules had not changed just because I was teaching instead of their normal teacher. All of this culminated in me deciding to adopt some of the management strategies that I had seen the classroom teacher use successfully. These included certain phases:

“Who is that rude person speaking when I/student was speaking? Stand up”

“How dare you ...”

Silence from the teacher with a certain look that let her the class know you were not going on until you had their attention.

“Arms folded eyes to the front”

Sending students out of class.

“Hands up ...”

Many of these strategies worked very well and were necessary in my first week of teaching. I had some management issues and the students certainly tested me:

Student: “Miss, that is not right we only do the spelling rule on Mondays”

Response: “Well I am teaching this week and we are doing it this way.”

I was tested but at no stage did I lose control of the class and I felt that they saw me as a teacher. At the end of the first week I had learned more about questioning skills and how different ways of asking questions simulated different students. I learned how to mix up my questioning techniques so that my lessons included the whole class. My co-operating teacher was very pleased with how I had incorporated his management suggestions and was very positive in his feedback about my presence at the front of the classroom.

As we moved into the next week the students continued to test me but in different ways. As they got to know me they tried different strategies to get me to let them do activities that they wanted to do and to contravene basic rules. I now believe that the problem I had experienced in reacting to these tests was that I was using someone else’s classroom management techniques. At the front of the classroom I was playing the part of a disciplinarian teacher. I was not being the sort of teacher I wanted to be. In some ways I suppose this was a necessary evil because I was coming into a class halfway through the year and had to establish my authority in a very short space of time. However, I found that it was difficult to be flexible in reacting to various situations when you were not being yourself. I needed to take the classroom context that I found myself in and develop classroom management strategies that reflected who I wanted to be in the classroom. It is not in my nature to be a straight disciplinarian but at the same time many of these kids needed boundaries.

All of this came to a head during my first observation lesson. It was a music lesson. Looking back perhaps a poor choice of lesson for my first observation, due to the fact that the students had a bad experience of music lessons. However, I went ahead with it anyway because my supervisor had said she was looking forward to it. This was the first time I had experienced genuine negativity from the class in reaction to my lesson and it was genuinely the first time I thought to myself "*I have no idea what to do*". The kids really sensed this and around five students successfully sought to subvert the lesson. It continued to the point where I decided to abandon my lesson and go back to an earlier text type lesson. In the end I was happy with some aspects of how I managed the debacle (ie moving back into a quite successful language lesson). However, this was my first failure and this was when I really began to learn. In discussions with my supervisor and in my own reflections I realised that I had not been able to counter their negativity because I was not being myself. I was being tough controlling and generally a grouchy nag.

I began to realise that in Year 5/6 the students are starting to be more mature and that if I was to expect them to give me something of themselves they needed to see some thing of me. The next day I conducted a lesson that involved a class discussion about what the students thought the rules of the classroom should be. The students gave me their ideas and I wrote them on the board. We had a discussion about what had gone wrong and I went out on a limb and invited the students to be honest about what they thought had gone wrong. Out came some genuine outpourings about the fact that in my music they only learned baby songs and theory (I attended their music lessons and this is certainly true) and that no one was interested in music that they liked. We talked about mutual respect and all the things that flowed from this.

I got the impressions that in the past teachers had been so busy managing them that no one ever stopped to listen to what they had to say about how they were being managed. The students put forward some ideas of their own for management such rewards (10 minutes before the bell to continue craft activity for students who had behaved appropriately) and a warning system. Importantly for me I conducted that whole lesson, which amazingly held their attention for 45 minutes, as Kerri Tearle not as my co-operating teacher or my supervisor or a text book teacher and it really worked. On a couple of issues I really opened myself to the students and their reaction was nothing but positive.

I would be lying if I said after this there were no more management problems but my relationship with the students, particularly the difficult students, moved to a much more positive level. From this day on I developed more of my own teaching skills and possibly this was when I actually started to teach. I think that appealing to their better nature and giving them a voice in the classroom won me a great deal of respect and provided me with a classroom environment that was ready to learn. There were definitely more challenges ahead (in week three I had a casual teacher who completely undermined my teaching by stopping to critique aspects of my teaching in front of the class – almost causing a riot amongst the students and in that same week one of my students ran away from school) but I dealt with them more naturally. I took what I learned from my experiences and colleagues and integrated that with who I wanted to be as a teacher.

This development of my perception of my role as a teacher has given me a genuine belief that I can be a really effective teacher even with a difficult class. At the beginning of the year I set out my teaching goals in the first reflective assignment as follows:

- Promoting social justice,
- Promoting critical thinking,
- Creating a positive learning environment and
- Creating a positive self-image of myself as a teaching professional

As a result of my practicum I am more committed to these goals than ever but I have a more realistic perception of how they measure up with the realities of the classroom. I can see how dealing with students who are constantly exhibiting appalling behaviour could really destroy some of your ideals but I also saw experienced the wonderful outcomes that are possible when a teacher persists with a difficult student. Teaching is not an easy job but I really experienced what my supervisor and so many lecturers have told me that in teaching the highs really do outweigh the lows.